

There's Power in Understanding Policy

By Shawnta S. Barnes – August 29, 2017



A few years ago, a friend forwarded me an email she received from an organization called Teach Plus. Knowing I loved to write, she thought I might be interested in a storytelling event they were hosting. Patrick McAlister, who is now the Director of Policy for the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE), was the Policy Director for Teach Plus Indiana at the time and he facilitated the event. That event led me to

begin drafting the piece “Why I do this work” which would later be published in the *Indianapolis Recorder*. I appreciated the information I learned and when the event was over, I wanted to avoid the inevitable socializing that would take place after the event, so I had planned to bolt through the nearest exit, but before I could, McAlister stopped me. He began to tell me about this policy fellowship and suggested I apply.

Honestly, I was not interested because politics and policy made me frustrated. After the event, I began receiving weekly emails from Teach Plus. At first I deleted the emails, but one day I decided to read one and then I was motivated to read another because those emails highlighted how educators were making a difference because they understood how policy works. Although I didn’t think I would be selected, I decided I would at least complete the application for the fellowship. Surprising to me, I was selected for the 2016-17 Teach Plus policy fellowship.

Through the fellowship, I learned how to become an empowered educator. I understood complaining in my classroom or venting to others was not a productive way to proceed. I learned how to write testimony, how to write op-eds, how to get involved at IDOE, and how to connect to the right people at the right time to hopefully move the needle a little bit.

Last Wednesday, I was honored to meet Dr. Celine Coggins founder of Teach Plus. She was here in Indianapolis to lead a book talk for her new book *How To Be Heard: 10 Lessons Teachers Need to Advocate for their Students and Profession*. She shared teaching was her superpower and she was glad, as she steps down as CEO of Teach Plus, that educators across the country have learned how to advocate for their students.

I believe the Teach Plus Policy Fellowship has kept many educators, such as myself, in the classroom who thought about walking away because they didn’t believe they could make a difference that would improve the lives of their students. I am proud I am one of those educators who understands and now believes I can influence policy. It isn’t easy, but it was impossible before because I lacked the knowledge. Looking back, I’m glad I didn’t make it to the exit because making it to that exit might have meant me eventually exiting the classroom.